



**BRIEFING: APRIL 4, 2013, BOARD MEETING AGENDA ITEM #4**

**TO:** Chairman Richard and Board Members

**FROM:** Mark McLoughlin,  
Deputy Director of Environmental Planning

**DATE:** April 4, 2013

**RE:** Fresno to Bakersfield Section Preliminary Staff Recommendation on Preferred Alternative to Designate in Final Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Impact Statement

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**Background**

The Authority and Federal Railroad Administration released a Fresno to Bakersfield Section Revised Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR)/Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for public review and comment on July 20, 2012. That document evaluated the project alternatives covered by the Draft EIR/EIS, new alternatives that bypassed Hanford to the west, a new alternative through Bakersfield that reduced impacts to the city, and engineering modifications to other alternatives that had occurred since the release of the Draft EIR/EIS.

The public was provided a 90-day review and comment period on the Revised DEIR/Supplemental DEIS. In addition, public hearings were conducted in Fresno, Hanford, and Bakersfield in late August 2012. Following the public review period, formal responses to comments on the original Draft EIR/EIS and the Revised DEIR/Supplemental DEIS are being, anticipated for release with the Final EIR/EIS in October 2013.

**Discussion**

Based on the evaluation of project alternatives and public and agency comments on the Draft EIR/EIS and the Revised Draft EIR/Supplemental Draft EIS, the staff has identified its preliminary recommendation for a Preferred Alternative for the Fresno to Bakersfield section of the California High-Speed Train project based on data and analysis to date. After careful consideration of data in the Draft EIR/EIS, the Revised DEIR/Supplemental DEIS, additional avoidance of Section 4(f) properties, and public comments, a "Preferred Alternative" is recommended by staff for the north-south alignment for the Fresno to Bakersfield Section and for station locations. This preliminary Preferred Alternative is based on technical environmental criteria that comply with the Clean Water Act Section 404(b)(1) Guidelines promulgated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The Preferred Alternative consists of parts of the BNSF

Alternative, the Hanford West Bypass 2 Alternative (below grade), the Corcoran Bypass Alternative, and the Allensworth Bypass Alternative. From that point south, technical environmental information indicates that the Preferred Alternative appears to be the Wasco-Shafter Bypass and the Bakersfield Hybrid (see Figure S-1). However, information continues to be received from stakeholders in the Wasco, Shafter, and Bakersfield areas. The Authority wishes to continue to work with these stakeholders to identify the most appropriate HST alignment from Wasco to the project terminus in Bakersfield. As indicated above, current information indicates that the Wasco-Shafter Bypass Alternative and the Bakersfield Hybrid Alternative are also potentially part of the Preferred Alternative. The Preferred Alternative includes a station in downtown Fresno on Mariposa Street, a station in downtown Bakersfield on Truxtun Avenue, and a potential future station site west of Hanford on State Route 198.

None of the proposed Heavy Maintenance Facilities (HMF) is preferred over any of the HMF sites evaluated in the Revised DEIR/Supplemental EIS or any of the HMF sites evaluated in the Merced Fresno Final EIR/EIS. Selection of an HMF will be requested in the future. The HMF sites are not a criterion effecting the selection of a preferred alignment.

The Preferred Alternative provides the least impacts to aquatic resources, the least environmental impacts considering the collective evaluation of natural and community resources, the least impacts on Section 4(f) resources, is the least costly alternative, has the fewest constructability issues, and therefore best meets the Authority's project objectives and purpose and need.

The Preferred Alternative results in the following:

- Fewer impacts to aquatic resources than the BNSF Alternative and generally incorporates the least impacts to aquatic resources of the individual geographic alternatives.
- Fewer Section 4(f) uses than the BNSF Alternative and fewer than all individual geographic alternatives.
- Fewer effects on residences, commercial and industrial facilities, and community resources than the BNSF Alternative; effects vary by individual geographic alternative.
- Fewer construction impacts such as noise, farmland, air quality, cultural resources, parks, than the BNSF Alternative; effects vary by individual geographic alternative.
- Least constructability issues and lowest cost alternative (together with a similar alignment terminating with the Bakersfield South Alternative).
- Takes only 1 minute longer than the BNSF Alternative between Fresno and Bakersfield, plus adds 1 minute to the Bakersfield to Palmdale segment related to the Bakersfield station.

The estimated cost of the Preferred Alternative is about \$800 million less than the BNSF Alternative, and is the lowest cost alternative of all possible alternative combinations (together with a similar alignment terminating with the Bakersfield South Alternative). The Preferred Alternative bypasses the downtown areas of the cities of Corcoran, Wasco, and Shafter and the unincorporated communities of Laton, Grangeville, Armona, and Allensworth, while also reducing the impacts in downtown Fresno and Bakersfield as compared to the BNSF alternative. Lastly, the Preferred Alternative minimizes constructability issues that can lead to delay and cost escalation.

## **Recommendations**

This is an information item only. Staff is not requesting Board concurrence in the Fresno to Bakersfield section Preferred Alternative at this time. Staff will request Board direction on further work related to the Preferred Alternative prior to returning for Board action at the Board's May 2013, meeting. It is anticipated that staff will seek Board concurrence in designation of the Preferred Alternative for inclusion in the Final EIR/EIS at the May 2013, Board meeting.

Designation of the Preferred Alternative for inclusion in the Final EIR/EIS is not a final alignment selection or project approval. The Board has options for its final decision on the Fresno to Bakersfield project alignment and station alternatives, and will consider those options and make a final decision after issuance of the Final EIR/EIS in the fall. The Notice of Determination adopting the Final EIR will be based on the results of the technical reviews of the alternatives along with other factors, including public input. A Notice of Determination can certify all or part of a Final EIR.

## **Attachments**

Staff Recommendations: Preferred Alternative